

Emperors and heroes at Aphrodisias

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In the 1980s a remarkable series of some eighty marble reliefs was excavated at Aphrodisias in Caria, Turkey. They belonged to a temple complex built in the first century A.D. to celebrate the city's close relationship with the Roman emperors of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. In this article Bert Smith explores their unusual combination of Greek and Roman subjects - great heroes of the hellenic past juxtaposed with emperors shown as titanic world-rulers.

Omnibus 4 reported the discovery of the temple complex at Aphrodisias at the time, but now, after years of conservation work, the reliefs are displayed for the first time in a new custom-built museum at the site (opened in June 2008). At the same time, part of the building from which the reliefs come is being restored (above), to allow the visitor to see how they looked in their original setting.

Aphrodisias

The city, situated in inland Caria (see map), was famous for its cult of Aphrodite and for its marble sculptors. In the later first century B.C., it was taken under the personal protection of Augustus and received mouth-watering privileges - autonomy within the Roman province of Asia, asylum rights for the temple of Aphrodite, and (best of all) tax-free status. The leading citizens prospered and were very grateful. The Sebasteion was their extravagant response. It was not a project of the emperors - the whole thing was very much a local initiative.

Sebasteion

The complex is situated off the city's regular grid, east of the city centre (see city plan, p. 2). It was dedicated both to the local goddess Aphrodite and to the emperors ('Sebasteion' means 'Temple of the Emperors'). Construction stretched from c. A.D. 20 to 60, from the reign of Tiberius to that of Nero, and the work was paid for by two leading Aphrodisian families.

There was an entrance gate at the west, a long processional avenue (90 x 14 m) flanked by 12 m-high buildings, and a raised temple at the east end. The long

avenue functioned both as a sanctuary space and as an urban thoroughfare.

The north and south buildings that defined the avenue were three-storeyed, with superimposed Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian orders, and they carried marble reliefs in their upper storeys for their whole length (p. 3). The reliefs were framed by the columnar architecture so that the two facades looked like closed picture-walls. Some 200 reliefs were required for the whole project. Other cities honoured the emperors with monuments and images, but this complex was truly over the top.

Gods, emperors, myths

The south building is the best preserved part. It was sponsored by two brothers, Attalos and Diogenes, from a wealthy local family. The reliefs in the third storey featured emperors and gods, while those in the second storey have scenes from Greek mythology. The heroes of myth represent the past; the Roman emperors above, on the same plane as the Olympian gods, represent the present. The sequence of the reliefs can be reconstructed from their find-places in the excavation.

Olympian emperor gods

The emperors are represented as powerful warrior divinities. Claudius for example slaughters Britannia like a new Achilles killing the Amazon queen at Troy (right). The designers mixed their Roman rulers in with the old gods as near-equal partners. They are, as one of the inscriptions on the building calls them, *Theoi Sebastoi Olympioi*, or 'Olympian emperor gods'. This phrase captures well the intended feel

of the images.

The reliefs were arranged in groups of three, with a wider relief above the doorway into each of the rooms below. The main early Roman emperors are present: Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero, with younger princes and imperial women. Their most important activity is victorious war over barbarians on the edges of empire, in the furthest east (Armenia) and furthest west (Britannia). For the Aphrodisians, Britain was a ghastly shaggy place, at the end of the earth, and in urgent need of a good imperial beating.

In the logic of the complex, Roman world rule is secured by the expanded pantheon of old and new divinities. One extraordinary relief shows the emperor Claudius striding across the heavens receiving a cornucopia from an earth figure and a ship's steering oar from a sea figure (p. 3). As in Greek texts of the period written in his praise, the emperor is portrayed as a towering superman - 'lord of land and sea, benefactor and saviour of the whole world'. Such an image is quite unlike the way the living emperor was portrayed in Rome (there he is a sober citizen priest) and quite unlike the Claudius we expect from reading the jaundiced accounts of later Roman historians.

Myths and heroes

Below the emperors, the second storey of the south building featured a long series of heroic stories from Greek, Roman, and local mythology. In the groups of three, the narrower reliefs have meander decoration below. Since the designers had some fifty spaces to fill, the subjects are wide and varied: Achilles, Aineias, Bellerophon, Dionysos, Herakles, Orestes, Meleager, Polyphemos, Prometheus, Triptolemos are all there.

Mythological images were both decorative and meaningful: they evoked a shared religion and culture. The stories may seem a bit random to us, but they were chosen carefully, and cluster around several relevant themes: Aphrodite, Troy, and heroic benefaction.

Love stories celebrated the power of Aphrodite, and heroes working for the

good of mankind were like the emperors. Triptolemos gave man grain, Prometheus gave fire, and Herakles and Dionysos (these two each appear five times) achieved Olympian status through their deeds. Superhuman achievements had also made the emperors into gods.

Prominent at the east end of the complex are parts of the Trojan story of Aineias (Aeneas), son of Aphrodite, ancestor of Julius Caesar and of Augustus' family. These stories were the mythological enactment of the special relationship between Aphrodisias and Rome. This section is also the best preserved part of the whole complex; it is also the subject of the new restoration.

Anastylosis – or getting it right

Virtually all the architectural components and all the reliefs survive from a long stretch of the east end of the south building. As our opening picture shows, it is currently in the process of being restored in its original position on the site. This painstaking stone-for-stone reconstruction, or *anastylosis*, places each marble piece of the façade in its exact ancient position. It shows the scale and effect of the building and the position of the reliefs in the architecture. The original reliefs are in the new museum. The *anastylosis* has casts of the reliefs in artificial stone (you cannot tell the difference from the ground).

The east end is closest to the temple and here the programme is tightest and most relevant to the theme of Aphrodisias and Rome. The reconstruction will eventually include part of the third storey; at the moment, it has reached the reliefs in the second storey above the first room from the east end. Even partial and half-finished, we can see that the effect of this figured picture-wall seen from below was striking and powerful.

A local Aineid

The first three reliefs tell the story of Aineias, son of Aphrodite: (1) his divine conception; (2) his flight from Troy with his son Iulus; and (3) his arrival in Italy. They can be described in a bit more detail. Their subjects can be made out from the ground without difficulty.

(1) Anchises and Aphrodite (above): The Trojan shepherd Anchises gazes at the seated Aphrodite, his lover for one night on Mount Ida. She holds a small Eros on her lap: this is an erotic encounter. The head of Selene (Moon) appears above the mountain rocks: she indicates night-time. It was from this union that Aineias, featured in the next panel, was born.

(2) Aineias' flight from Troy (front cover): Aineias in armour carries his aged father Anchises on his shoulder and leads

his young son Iulus by the hand. They are fleeing from the sack of Troy. The figure floating behind is Aphrodite, Aineias' mother: she is helping their escape. Old Anchises carries a round box that held images of Troy's ancestral gods.

(3) Aineias' arrival in Italy (back cover): Poseidon stands naked over a sea-going ship stopped at a short column. A dolphin jumps between his legs. Aineias, his head veiled in the Roman manner, pours a libation, a thank-offering for his safe arrival in Italy. Behind Poseidon's shoulder, a separately worked young male head was inserted into the background (this is probably an image of a deceased companion of Aineias).

The Flight from Troy was adapted from a well known composition: it was immediately recognisable. The other two scenes are not known elsewhere and may have been designed specially for this local 'Aineid'. It is remarkable how the full iconography of these two reliefs can still be read and understood.

Aineias and Augustus

Aphrodite, Aineias, and Iulus were the forebears of the Julian family at Rome, the family of Augustus. To drive home this connection of the goddess of Aphrodisias with the ruling Augustan family, the designers placed an equally programmatic group of three imperial reliefs above their mythological *Aineid* below.

In the centre, above the iconic Flight from Troy, stood the naked warrior god Augustus with Victory, while the paired flanking reliefs show Gaius and Lucius, his grandsons and adopted sons. They are shown in the guise of the Dioskouroi, the sons of Zeus. This mythological form describes the princes as sons of Zeus-like Augustus.

Such divine and heroic visual language was the natural way for Greek provincials to describe the special powers of their Roman masters. The Sebasteion reliefs show us how the emperor was visualized as a warrior like Achilles, as a universal benefactor like Herakles, and as a new and present divinity made manifest to his subjects. These conceptions of the emperor were widely shared. Only the Aphrodisians it seems thought to try and describe them in 200 large marble reliefs – unless there are other such Sebasteions waiting to be discovered.

Bert Smith teaches Greek and Roman art at Oxford, works at Aphrodisias in the summers, and is currently writing a book dedicated to the Sebasteion reliefs.